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FM AMEMBASSY ANTANANARIVO  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2099  
INFO RUEHZO/AFRICAN UNION COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ANTANANARIVO 000115

SENSITIVE  
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DEPT FOR AF/E AND AF/FO

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [ECON](#) [CN](#)  
SUBJECT: Comorans Rally Against Sambi

REF: ANTAN 107  
ANTAN 102

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: Dozens of opposition leaders, Imams, and elder leaders representing all three islands held a rally February 18 calling on the people to actively prevent President Sambi's constitutional referendum from taking place. They denounced the president as illegitimate and dangerous, vowing to take their case to the Constitutional Court and hold more rallies in the coming days. END SUMMARY.

"Opposition Declares War On Referendum"

¶2. (U) The opposition newspaper La Gazette, island radio and television covered the February 18 opposition rally in Iconi, outside Moroni. Coverage highlighted opposition, religious, and traditional leaders denouncing President Sambi as "liar," "traitor," and "Shi'a devil." Their many complaints include: Sambi's questionable appointments to control the Constitutional Court in July, 2008; his promulgating an economic citizenship law allegedly without proper approval from the legislature; his ties to Shi'a Iran; failure to deliver campaign promises on housing and development; consolidating "dictatorial" power at the expense of island autonomy; and jeopardizing Comoran unity by attempting to extend his mandate, delaying Moheli's turn in the rotating presidency.

¶3. (SBU) Former Grande Comore island president El-Bak, who studied with Sambi in Medina, Saudi Arabia, said the president was expelled for being a poor Islamic student, went to Sudan, and eventually to Iran. El-Bak said Sambi remains under Iranian influence, and is excessively influenced by "questionable investors" like the Comoro Gulf Holdings group who actively lobbied for the economic citizenship law. (Note: Contacts allege - without any evidence - that Comoran passports are already being sold to foreigners, possibly stateless Bedouins from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. End Note.)

¶4. (SBU) Current Grande Comore island president Abdulawahab repeated publicly what he recently told Comoros Officer (REF B): that the opposition will refuse dialogue with Sambi if he insists on holding a constitutional referendum immediately thereafter. He called on the Imams and elder "notables" from all three islands to tell their communities to prevent Union officials from campaigning for the referendum in March. Abdouwahab said villages should not accept voting materials nor allow voting bureaus to be set up for the March 22 referendum. Said Mchamgama, President of the Mayors' Association of Grande Comore representing over 40 major towns, told Comoros Officer he believed most communities would actively block the referendum.

¶5. (U) Former Prime Minister and Mohelian Bolero joined the chorus, calling the referendum illegal if it extended Sambi in office and denied Moheli its rightful turn. Former Anjouanese island minister Halidy also spoke out against the referendum. A recurring theme among opposition speakers was that Sambi's home island, Anjouan, started the crisis in 1997 by seceding from the Comoros, leading to

the reconciliation agreements and constitution that created the rotating presidency. "Anjouan seceded and we created a rotating presidency to restore the Union; now an Anjouanese president is blocking the rotation," goes the accusation. Interestingly, several speakers praised former President Azali as a democrat for voluntarily stepping down in 2006 when Sambu was elected (REF A).

16. (SBU) Perhaps more damning were the statements of Imams and traditional elder "Notables" who command much respect among Comoran people. President Sambu, a Muslim cleric himself, has shrewdly courted these leaders since he was a presidential candidate in 2005. At Iconi, many of them, from all three islands, said that Sambu had betrayed moderate Sunni Comorans with his ties to Shi'ism.

17. (U) In Moheli, where leaders stand to have to wait an additional year for their turn in the rotating presidency if the referendum passes, Union military forces reportedly dispersed an anti-Sambu rally February 17.

COMMENT:  
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18. (SBU) The February 18 rally, while attracting only a few hundred Comorans, was significant on two counts. One, typically disunited opposition politicians representing all three islands stood together to denounce President Sambu and call on communities to actively prevent the March 22 referendum from taking place. Two, many Imams and notables -- traditional Comoran leaders comprising the core of Sambu's constituency -- have turned against the cleric-turned-President for religious betrayal. END COMMENT.

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